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¶1. (U) This cable contains sensitive but unclassified information - not for distribution on the Internet.

¶2. (SBU) Summary: Luo Xuegang, a Catholic priest in Sichuan Province's Yibin city, recently told Consul General that the Yibin diocese has a 135-year history and more than 40,000 believers. Luo said that although the Yibin diocese has 22 Catholic churches and places of worship, it has only eight priests and one (94-year old) bishop. Luo provided specific examples of active government control of the Catholic Church in Sichuan, while making general statements before our FAO handlers that downplayed the government's role. End Summary.

A Priest Describes the Catholic Church in Yibin

¶3. (SBU) Over a January 7 lunch that included representatives from the Yibin Foreign Affairs Office (FAO), Luo Xuegang told CG that Yibin has over 40,000 Catholics who are led by eight priests and one bishop. (Note: A 2007 Yibin College Journal article noted that Jesuit missionaries arrived in Sichuan in the 1640s; by 1702, French missionaries of the Missionary Society of Paris were preaching and making converts in Yibin. In 1946, the Yibin diocese had 28,000 Catholics in a population of 7.6 million. The diocese had 26 foreign missionaries, 36 Chinese assistant clergy, five foreign monks, 45 Chinese monks, 60 lay preachers, 100 religious centers, and one clinic with 80 beds. The Yibin diocese is now led by 94-year old Bishop Chen, who is recognized by both the Vatican and the leadership of the Catholic Patriotic Association in Beijing (reftel). Bishop Chen was ill during our visit to Yibin, so we could not meet him. End Note.)

¶4. (SBU) The Catholic Diocese of Yibin includes the cities of Neijiang, Zigong, and Luzhou, which together have a total population of about 15.5 million people, according to Sichuan's official statistics. Luo said that Yibin diocese has 22 Catholic churches and places of worship, although he did not explain what constituted a place of worship. He briefly mentioned family churches, but he did not say how many existed in and around Yibin. Luo may not have been including family churches in his total count of Catholic churches. The religious atmosphere in Yibin, according to Luo, is one in which believers

of different faiths, from Taoism, to Buddhism, to Catholicism coexist harmoniously.

¶5. (SBU) Luo said that Yibin had a shortage of priests and, in some cases, one priest had responsibility for more than one church. He stated that churches have enough bibles for believers, many of whom live in rural areas. Luo went on to say that churches offered training to the rural believers whose knowledge of the Catholic faith was "not high quality."

Attempts to Show Government's Hands-Off Approach

¶6. (SBU) Luo, at different points in the conversation, emphasized that the government had "limited" involvement with the establishment and operation of the Catholic Diocese of Yibin. He said that the number of believers in a given area was the criteria used to determine if a new church should be built. Luo said that the government did not get too involved in the operation of legal churches, but did provide "support" to them. He also said that the Chinese people enjoyed freedom of religion. (Comment: Luo may have felt the need to emphasize the government's non-interference in religious activities because members of the Yibin FAO were present at the lunch. Or, he may have been frankly conveying his perception of the relationship between the Catholic Church and the government. CG did not have an opportunity to talk with Luo without the FAO near at hand, however. End Comment.)

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Statements Suggest Strong Government Involvement in Activities

¶7. (SBU) In contrast to Luo's general statements about religious freedom, he repeatedly provided specific examples that showed extensive governmental oversight and involvement with the Catholic Diocese of Yibin. He said that men who study to join the priesthood must pass a test administered by the government before becoming a priest, although Luo did not say how this test differed from the church-administered test. Luo further said that the government would not allow too many small churches. He claimed that small churches would lead to "disorder" and were more difficult for the government to manage. In another example of direct government involvement, Luo noted that the Yibin government had shown great interest in refurbishing the bishop's office building. The government has pledged to make the office building one of the best buildings in Yibin. The Sichuan provincial government around 2004 or 2005 provided 20 million RMB to rebuild the Sichuan's Catholic Theological College in Pixian, although Luo could not remember the date exactly. All men in Yibin who seek to become priests must study at this college. Luo stated that since 2005, Sichuan's government has increased its support to Catholic churches.

Father Luo Biographic Information

¶8. (SBU) Luo said that his father, mother, and many of his

relatives were Catholics. He entered Sichuan Catholic Theological College in 1984, and became a priest in 1991. He recently transferred to Yibin to help Bishop Chen. Luo told CG that he has traveled through the rural areas of the Yibin diocese, and is now focused on building churches and training. He expressed an interest in other religions during the course of the lunch conversation, and said that he had recently attended a seminar hosted by the International Taoism Association that had attracted participants from a number of areas including Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

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